

Sibling Grief

Following Murder

When a brother or sister dies, the sudden reality of the death may be too much for families to accept. Siblings may experience extreme loneliness because they believe that no one understands what they're going through. They may feel they cannot share their feelings with other members of the family because they want to protect them from additional pain. Due to the shock and confusion that murder brings, there will be no comprehension of why their brother or sister was so quickly taken from them. Reactions may divide the family – there will be those who seek revenge, and those who would rather consider forgiveness. Where feelings are not shared this can cause division and argument.

Why Sibling Grief is Different

Siblings have their own method of grieving, based on the relationship with their brother or sister. Siblings may experience a loss of identity as their self-image is inter-related with the deceased. Siblings may experience varied emotions including anger, guilt, grief and abandonment. They may attempt to deal with these powerful feelings through denial or suppression. Failure of others to recognize their loss will further complicate the grief process. In addition, they may be coping not only with the loss of a sibling but also with the loss of functional parents.

Comments from Siblings

Denial: 'Because murder is too hard to accept, I denied it happened. I did it for my own protection. I pretended it happened to someone else'

Anger: 'Verbally I would lash out at everyone. I couldn't express any other feeling. My sister was gone and as far as I was concerned, it was the world's fault.'

Guilt: 'My guilt led me to ask questions like 'Why am I still here?', 'Why wasn't it me?', and 'What did I do wrong for this to happen to my sister?''

Fear: 'When my brother was murdered, I thought who is next in our family? The world did not feel safe anymore.'

Physical Distress: 'I couldn't relax. My body suffered from stress with headaches, neck aches and having a few hours of sleep including nightmares didn't help'

Loss of Innocence: 'I'm no longer a child. Murder made me grow-up too fast and I lost a big part of my childhood that I can never get back'

Protective: 'When my sister was murdered, I was taking the role of my parents. I came to their side to comfort them. It took a while for me to think of my own grief.'

Loneliness: 'I had a friend of ten years tell me she couldn't handle being my friend anymore. She told me she didn't want to continue our relationship because she thought that murder would spread to her and her family'

Depression: 'I didn't want to get up from bed. If I did, I would dread going outside. I didn't want to see anyone. I felt that I couldn't trust anyone anymore, so I didn't want to make eye contact'

Pointers for Parents - Helpful

Accept your child's feelings. Allow them to grieve in their own way and encourage the expression of feelings.

Work on your own grief. Express sadness, anger and frustration. Parents and children may be drawn together by sharing each other's grief.

Spend time regularly with each child. This will offer assurance that they are loved. Show them that they are as important as the dead sibling.

Find healthy ways to remember your loved one. Some suggestions would be writing down memories in a journal, organizing photos in a special album or framing special artwork or writings.

Each child needs individual acceptance. Try to nurture their identity.

Getting outside help may make it easier for children or young people to communicate.

Pointers for Parents - Not Helpful

Don't judge. Don't tell them not to cry or suggest they be strong. Their loss needs to be recognized.

Don't keep feelings to yourself. Withholding your emotions from the rest of the family may inhibit others.

Don't avoid them. This will make them feel rejected and abandoned. Don't make them feel that they have become a burden.

Don't take-down family pictures. This may be interpreted by the sibling as a loss of family and may be devastating.

Don't compare the dead child to the living child. It could cause feelings of inadequacy.

Don't limit their space, even though you naturally feel a great need to be over-protective.

Remember, it can be difficult to grieve as an individual when there is mass grief – it is hard to stand apart from the crowd.